

QUAESTIONES ENTOMOLOGICAE

A periodical record of entomological investigation published at the Department of Entomology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta.

Volume 6

Number 3

1 July 1970

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Editorial – The Patience of Job

Employment opportunities for entomologists are . . . no; let me start again. Jobs for bugmen are harder to find today than they have been for sometime. In some other fields it is worse. Thereby hangs a tale.

Vanessa Cole was born with an interest in insects. At school, in the dirty thirties, she embarrassed her teachers – otherwise good teachers and good biologists – with specimens she picked up on her way there, for she was a country girl. She learned all she could from these same teachers, and they learned something from her. Thence to university, where she learned some of it again and how to avoid doing this, and much else besides. Eventually, to another university where they taught her how to find out things for herself – which she had been doing most of her life – in a manner acceptable to the current crop of scientists, and how to say that she had done so, verbally and in writing. She worked at a field station – as a post-hole digger – to earn her keep. She passed courses, learned another language, read some of the literature, gave a seminar, wrote a thesis and defended it, and she took the first job that offered – digging post-holes on a farm, with a vial in each pocket. Her job did not, of itself, require much thought so she thought about the insects she unearthed from her post-holes and accumulated in her vials. She wrote a paper entitled: “Insects of the top 50 cm of grey-wooded soils”.

In another part of the country Tom Tegula was at school in the dirty thirties too; he took aptitude tests, received counsel from counsellors, and learned that he was best fitted for making money. He became handsome and, after on the job training, did pretty well in the forties and fifties selling insecticides to farmers for wireworm control. One day in spring, after completing an important sale to a farmer, he felt so good that he decided to walk across the fields back to his car. His roving eye lighted on a down-to-earth girl across the pasture wielding a post-hole auger so he walked across to her and said: “Que faites-vous?” Having passed her language requirement she replied: “Je cherche de l’or”. He said that augured well for her future as he had gold enough for two and, since her education was as – er – broad as her nature was flexible, she took him at his word and married him.

The most profitable product of the company Tom worked for turned out to have long term side-effects on the chromosomes of wheat, resulting in monstrosities which rendered the product unsaleable. The salesmen were sacked; Tom, with all the stubbornness of the

Tegulae could adapt to nothing new. Meanwhile, three tiny Tegulae had been growing and would soon need to be sent to University, so Vanessa went back to work, studying wireworms for Tom's company which had suddenly become interested in these animals. Tom puttered around the home, trying to make himself useful, but becoming more desperate as week succeeded week. One day he came across Vanessa's old post-hole auger in the basement which started him on a train of thought leading to a new job with his old company; taking soil samples for Vanessa's work on wireworms.

By the time the tiny Tegulae got to university it was the empty seventies. After talking things over with mother they all decided to study what they wanted to study.

If this tale has a moral it is that times change; that it is best to seek an education in a subject that interests you rather than in one which the market, when you start out, seems to suggest; to be guided by auger rather than augur. Whichever way you choose, and whatever the current state of the market, there can hardly have been a time in human history when the world had a greater need than now for education in biology and especially in population biology. And there is no more suitable group of animals as a basis for such education than the insects. Training may be wasted, education never.

Brian Hocking